

RIKSMUSEETS ETNOGRAFISKA AVDELNING

SMÄRRE MEDDELANDEN

N:r 6

FURTHER NOTES ON  
THE USE OF STILTS

BY

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## FURTHER NOTES ON THE USE OF STILTS.

Last year the writer published a treatise on the use of stilts, in which paper their distribution in Africa will have been fairly completely given whilst their occurrence in other parts of the world was also touched upon.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently I have collected a number of data which are here adduced in completion of the main treatise. This material — for which I am partly indebted to the kindness of esteemed colleagues and friends (in the first place Prof. B. Struck) who have read my initial treatise — I am here presenting on a geographical basis. In the main treatise the material is grouped according to the purpose for which stilts are used.

### EUROPE.

To the few already given instances of a *practical use* of stilts I will here add that hop-pickers in Kent (England) stalk about in their hop gardens on stilts which are 15 feet in height, and repair broken strings before the hops reach the top of the poles.<sup>2</sup> Particulars of this will be seen in figs. 1 and 2. According to a statement given at second hand stilts are used by herders in south-western Germany, as well as by the Basques when taking fruit, vegetables, and such like to sell in the market-place of the town.<sup>3</sup> The circumstance that stilts are used by the Basques in particular is interesting to note seeing that these people, as is well known, are retaining several ancient cultural elements. It appears to me very probable that in this particular we have before us a point of connection between the Basques and the well-known stilt-walkers of Les Landes.<sup>4</sup> It is further worth mentioning that at

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<sup>1</sup> K. G. Lindblom, The use of stilts, especially in Africa and America. Riksmuseets Etnografiska avdelning, Smärre Meddelanden N:o 3. Stockholm 1927.

<sup>2</sup> The Sphere, July 9, 1927, p. 71. This issue appeared shortly after my first paper had been published.

<sup>3</sup> K. Lang, in Völkerkunde, p. 276. Vienna 1927.

<sup>4</sup> B. Struck has placed at my disposal a picture of these people, previously unknown to me, obtained from the area behind the dunes at the Gulf of Gascony (Departments Gironde and Landes). This region is largely drained and planted

the inundation that took place at Brunswick (Germany) in the beginning of November 1926 boys used stilts as means of going about (fig. 3).<sup>1</sup> Possibly this only constitutes an isolated and quite casual case, but it may of course also conceivably have its roots far back in time when bridges still were rare in some parts of Europe. Thus in my main treatise I have adduced an instance from Carniola of how it was customary in the 17th century to cross the river Feistritz on stilts, at fording places.

### ASIA.

Also as regards Asia I have been able to some extent to supplement my earlier study, and in the first place this refers to China, where stilt-walking in certain localities occurs on the birthdays of certain popular divinities as well as in connection with New Year's festivities and on other special occasions. Doolittle relates how in Tientsin on such occasions "a company of men walk on stilts through the streets in procession. Some of them represent women, and all are gaudily and fantastically dressed. Each holds in his hand some utensil. They go usually in single file, singing or chanting. Occasionally one performs some strange act, as kicking out one foot, or whirling round, etc. They train themselves to walk along slowly or fast with perfect ease and self-possession. The performers oftentimes are themselves members of some club or union, or are hired to perform their part in public by a club or union connected with the worship of idols or the practice of superstition. Frequently immense crowds gather to witness their performances in procession."<sup>2</sup> A similar account is given from China by some writer whose name is not stated. He speaks of "stilt-walkers' societies", whose gaudily appressed members march in procession through the streets. "Each participant has in his hand some object which he waves about, such as a fan, a musical instrument, a small

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with forests, but there remain in places marshy tracts for the traversing of which tall stilts are used. Struck's collection (from Meyer's *Hist.-Geogr. Kalender*, 9. Jg., Bl. 8. 1905. O. Schultz del.).

<sup>1</sup> Pictured in *Kölner Illustrierter Zeitung* I, Nr. 11. 13 Nov. 1926, p. 206. Struck has turned my invention to this.

<sup>2</sup> *J. Doolittle, Social Life of the Chinese*, p. 520 (with fig.). London 1868. I did not have access to this work when compiling my first paper.

paper-kite, etc. The company passes along in single file, during which individuals singingly make a show of their proficiency by standing on one leg or by whirling round with frantic rapidity. These performers, who are members of a special club, and have beforehand given themselves some practice, then receive gratuities from the public for their display". Fig. 4 shows stilt-walkers in the town of Niuchwang in the province of Liao-tung who are giving a performance on the Chinese New-Year's Day. They are in the service of the Customs Department. Many of them are dressed up as women. They are waving flags and playing on tomtoms and drums. For their expenses they usually recoup themselves mainly by giving their shows in front of the houses of foreigners who are residents of Niuchwang, or in their gardens.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence from another locality in China is provided by a motion picture made by the missionary A. E. Wandel for the Swedish Missionary Society in the neighbourhood of its station at the town of Kien-li in the Hu-peh. This film shows among other things a New Year's festival at which stilt-walkers are performing in the streets (fig. 5). In this case the performers consist of soldiers.

The method by which these Chinese stilts are fastened or used cannot, unfortunately, be ascertained from the photographic pictures. Judging from the sketch supplied by Doolittle (if we accept it as reliable), they would, strangely enough — in some manner difficult of explaining — seem to be fastened directly underneath the foot. In none of the three instances adduced are the performers masked.

In my previous treatise I also cited instances of the use of stilts in Japan, and among other things mentioned (p. 32) how Japanese children, girls as well as boys, use stilts during the winter to keep their feet dry, as the roads and streets are very muddy during that time of the year, this being the only instance known to me of stilts used for purely practical purposes in Asia. Fig. 6, "Japanese boys and girls amusing themselves on stilts in deep snow",<sup>2</sup> appears to illustrate this. The stilts are evidently made of bamboo ("bamboo horses").

To the instance already presented from Celebes I would add that I

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<sup>1</sup> Das Stelzenlaufen in China, p. 193 (with photo). Globus 1899 (75). For my first paper I went through the entire volume of the Globus without coming across anything referring to stilts, but exactly this issue I had not available!

<sup>2</sup> Struck's collection. (From Deutsche Illustrierte No. 5, p. 16. 1926. Gircke, phot.).

am informed by G. Friederici that Adriani and Kruit have written on the subject of stilts from the Toradja. Their work is, unfortunately, not within my reach. W. Kaudern (in a letter to the writer), is, as far as Celebes be concerned, of opinion that the use of stilts has spread from the northern portion of the island to eastern and central Celebes through the agency of Minahassa school teachers.

According to K. Lang (*vide supra*), stilts occur as children's toys among the Sarts.

### POLYNESIA.

In his review of my previously published study of stilts, Lowie mentions how in 1925 he chanced upon a group of Tahitian boys in the outskirts of Papeete who were engaged in a stilt-game: "Two boys about ten years old, though for a few minutes one of them was relieved by a somewhat older player, were walking on stilts about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  feet in height, the footrest, which was tied on, being but 2 feet above the ground. Each player kicked with one stilt against his adversary's, thus trying to bring him down. At times a badly aimed thrust would produce the ludicrous result of making the player turn his back to his opponent".<sup>1</sup> In view of the fact that stilts occur in several other Polynesian island groups, and of their having been mentioned already at an early date from Tahiti (Ellis, 1829), it hardly appears necessary in this case to take European influence into consideration. In the review just referred to, Lowie also cites an instance from Tahiti out of the more recent literature: "Les autres jeux d'enfants sont les échasses (*rore*) qui se composent de deux pièces: un baton sur lequel est solidement lié, à 50 centimètres de terre, un morceau de branche coudé".<sup>2</sup>

Again, Friederici has kindly informed me that stilts are also known from Mangarewa (Paumotu Islands). In my first paper I have cited instances from New Zealand, Hervey Islands and the Marquesas group, wherefore it appears to me that use of stilts must have been quite widely distributed through Polynesia.

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<sup>1</sup> R. H. Lowie, in *The American Anthropologist* 1928, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> *P. Huguenin, Raiatea la sacrée*, p. 143 (with text fig.). Neuchatel 1902. This work is not accessible to me.

## AMERICA.

Dr. H. D. Benjamins has been kind enough to write me that stilts occur among the ~~bush~~-negroes of Surinam. He writes: "In Surinam the boys (seldom the girls) use stilts for purpose of sport. They make them themselves, or have them made by the carpenter. The negro name is *tikoko*, very likely an African word. The way they use them is represented in your figs. 3 and 12 [the author's first paper]. The boys often hop on one stilt, holding the other under the arm".

"In the Indian villages (Caribs and Arawaks) I never saw stilts, and they are not mentioned by H. Ten Kate in his article 'Benedenlandsche Indianen' in the *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch West-Indië*."

That also among negroes in the West Indies, at any rate formerly, stilt-walkers used to appear at festivals I have shown in my previous paper (in St. Vincent, according to Bryan Edwards). Of this practice, F. Ortiz adduces from St. Kitts a modern instance, and from Cuba an earlier one. In the first-mentioned little island the negroes, he says, dance from Christmas to New Year, inclusively, daily in the streets whilst wearing masks and being grotesquely attired. Some wear horns on their heads (Cf. the horned masks of Africa), others are dressed up as women, whilst again some walk on stilts. As regards Cuba, O. has no modern instance to bring forward, but reproduces a picture showing how in the middle of the 19th century negroes celebrated Epiphany in Havana (fig. 7). Although his legs are not visible, there is undoubtedly a stilt-walker represented in the picture.<sup>1</sup>

From *the American Indians* I have been unable to obtain a single fresh instance of the use of stilts. On the contrary I may perhaps have to denote as doubtful certain of the data I have already given from North America (in my previous paper, p. 31), by which I refer to a few cases where it is only in vocabularies of North American languages that I have found the word meaning "stilts". As for instance as regards the Klamath (according to Gatschet's dictionary). As to this, Dr. Spier has in a letter to me kindly pointed out that during his studies among the Klamath "they named a variety of games but not

<sup>1</sup> F. Ortiz, *La Fiesta Afrocubana del "Día de Reyes"*, p. 21, fig. 1, a. *Archivos del Folklore Cubano*, Vol. I. Habana 1925. — Concerning festivals of a ritual character among West Indian negroes, see also A. M. Williams: "A Miracle-Play in the West Indies", *Journal of American Folklore*, p. 117, Vol. IX, and H. C. Balton: "Gombay, a festal rite of Bermudian negroes", *Ibid.*, p. 225, Vol. III.

the use of stilts. I am sure that they would have done so, had the stilts been original". Spier declares himself "somewhat doubtful also of the Alsea case" (which I adduced from quoting Frachtenberg) and points out to me that many dictionaries of North American languages include a great many words relating to European cultures, and that they must in all cases be used with extreme caution. Spier is undoubtedly right about this, and I know very well from my own experience in another sphere — that of the Bantu languages — how little vocabularies occasionally are to be relied upon. I know of one or two that give one an impression of the respective author having followed the lines of a vocabulary of his own language and then done his utmost to obtain local equivalents of as many words of that vocabulary as possible.

### AFRICA.

The authenticated instances of the use of stilts in Africa which I have given in my first paper will no doubt serve to convey a fairly complete picture of their distribution in this continent. And neither has any of the writers who have reviewed my treatise advanced anything of an additional nature. For my own part I have, however, been able to collect a number of addenda which nevertheless on the whole fall within the area of distribution delineated in my first paper. An interesting exception to this, which has been brought to my notice by Dr. Struck, I give below.

To the data already given from Liberia and its hinterland I will now add the following. The Liberian B. Anderson relates from his stay in the town of Ziggah Porrah Zue, "the capital of the Wymar country" (on the northern bank of the upper reaches of St. Paul's River) how "every day we passed in this town was given to festivity and enjoyment. One of their chief amusements was a 'Jack upon stilts', a fellow fantastically dressed, wearing a false face, and mounted upon stilts ten feet high fitted to the soles of his feet — with which he danced, leaped, and even climbed upon the houses. He was full of clownish tricks and sayings, and made much sport for the crowds; he belonged to the king's train, a sort of king's fool".<sup>1</sup> It may be presumed that the festiv-

<sup>1</sup>*B. Anderson*, Narrative of a journey to Musardu, p. 78. New York 1870. A.'s account of his journey has (in 1903) been criticised by Cassel (*Ann. geogr.* 1903) who essays to prove that A. never travelled as far as he states, but that he



ities here referred to were of a ritual character, possibly initiation or fecundity feasts.

Dr. Gebbing, Director of the Leipzig zoological garden, has been kind enough to write and inform me that on his expedition to the interior of Liberia he saw stilt-dancers among the Buzi (Toma), Gbandi and Mendi. These performers made their appearance at dances given by the chiefs to my correspondent. On one occasion G. witnessed a funeral at which five stilt-dancers were simultaneously performing. On this expedition he made a film picture (entitled "Durch unbekanntes Afrika. Forschungsexpedition durch das Hinterland von Liberia") in which stilts dancers are also seen whilst performing.

This information supplied me by Dr. Gebbing himself, Struck has most kindly supplemented with fuller particulars for my benefit. Thus he tells me that G., in *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten* 1927, has described masked dancers on stilts from the Buzi and the Gbandi,<sup>1</sup> and of this he has sent me a copy. The gist of this is briefly as follow: In the service of the secret societies there are "dancing devils", to whom very particular ability and potency are ascribed. Thus, for example, they are said to be able to build a liane bridge in a single night, and that they can shout and make themselves understood at a distance of 100 kilometres! These "dancing devils" are of two kinds, viz. stilt-dancers who disport themselves very skilfully on stilts  $2\frac{1}{2}$  metres high, and others that dance on the ground. Both categories wear carved wooden masks.<sup>2</sup>

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obtained his information from prisoners or other persons from the interior who had come down to the coast. However this may be, its bearing on the present paper is in any case of but secondary importance.

<sup>1</sup> *Leipziger N. Nachrichten*, No. 114; 24. IV. 1927, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Struck, who has seen Gebbing's film, has very kindly placed at my disposal notes on the stilt-walkers who appear in this picture, which I shall here quote in *extenso*: "Zwischen Vonjama und Kolahun oder wahrscheinlicher in Kolahun selbst (also Gbandi-Land) treten anlässlich einer Häuptlingstotenfeier 5 maskierte (ohne eigentliche Gesichtsmasken) Stelzenläufer auf, produzieren sich aber fast ausschliesslich einzeln. Die Stelzen sind mindestens  $2\frac{1}{2}$  m. hoch, meist unverziert; einer zeigte in der unteren Hälfte beide Stelzen bemalt, oben mit schwarz-weiss alternierenden hohen Rechtecken, unten mit dsgl. Quadraten [fig. 8]. Die Stelzentänzer lehnten sich gegen die Dächer der Hütten und kehrten nach ihren Produktionen (auch auf *einem* Bein!) ebendahin zurück; einer zog sich an dem Stroh des Daches bis zu dem etwa 6 m. hohen First empor, grätschte diesen,

An instance of the use of stilts which to a certain extent fills a gap in my map of their distribution in Africa (my previous paper, p. 24) is given by Clozel from the interior and westernmost portion of the Ivory Coast, from the outpost and village of Touba (about Lat. 8° N.). At this place a feast was given in C's honour, and one of the principal items of the programme consisted of three masked stilt dancers on high stilts, whose legs were concealed by a sort of trousers. The performers belonged to a pagan tribe of the mountain region south of Touba.<sup>1</sup>

Among the Habe (Habbé) of the steppes south of the Niger bend stilt-walkers perform in connection with masked dances, at least as far as I can judge from a motion picture taken among this people.<sup>2</sup> In their case masked dances are carried on at funeral and fecundity festivities (according to Haberlandt in Buschan's *Völkerkunde*).

To the citation already given from the Hausa (from Staudinger) I will here add another, from the same writer. When S. was at Loko (on the Benue river) there befell the time of Rhamadan, during which the young people indulged in a variety of pranks, dances and "masquerades", of which the latter were especially popular during this period. On one occasion there appeared a youth mounted on stilts and impersonating some kind of monster from which the girls ran away screaming.<sup>3</sup> In this connection S. says that in different Hausa villages he saw

liess sich dort wie tot vornübersinken, machte einige Sitzverbeugungen und liess sich dann, eben noch mit den Händen an der Firstverschnürung anhaltend, plötzlich auf dem Dach abfahren, obwohl der Anprall der Stelzen auf dem Erdboden offenbahr sehr heftig war. Er fuhr sofort in weiteren Tanzevolutionen auf dem Platze fort."

I have subsequently learnt that these dances were specially arranged for the film-taking done by the expedition, a matter that however, as far as the stilt-walking be concerned, may well be considered as of less importance.

<sup>1</sup> *F. J. Clozel*, Dix ans à la Côte d'Ivoire, p. 111 (photograph on p. 113). Paris 1906. "Le clou de ce tam-tam consiste dans trois danseurs montés sur de très hautes échasses, costumés et masqués; un tissu noir, à mailles assez lâches pour qu'ils puissent y voir, leur couvre tout le visage; le raccord entre leurs jambes et le bois des échasses est caché par des véritable pantalons qui descendent jusqu'auprès du sol; ils sont encore grandis par d'immenses chapeaux pointus."

<sup>2</sup> Pathé Frères, Family film No. 384.

<sup>3</sup> *P. Staudinger*, Im Herzen der Haussaländer, p. 454. Berlin 1889. In this case the occurrence has been pointed out by W. Schilde in his review of my first paper on the use of stilts, in *Ethnologischer Anzeiger*, p. 181. Stuttgart 1928.

boys using stilts, but gives no details as to the manner in which they were used.

One piece of information closely analogous to the stilt-walker among the Makonde of the southern portion of the Tanganyika Territory mentioned (from Weule) in my main treatise is given by Chubb from The Lindi district — the same area, as may be noted. His account is very detailed, and instructive. At the conclusion of the circumcision rites the dance of the *midimu*<sup>1</sup> (spirits) — according to Chubb, this word also signifies 'mask' — is held on the night before the boys return to their respective villages. The relations and friends gather at one of the elder's villages and there the dance of the *midimu* is held. "There are several kinds of *midimu* — the Ape, the Snake, the man with a woman's breasts, the man in the tree top (*on stilts*), etc., etc. — and each has its appropriate dance. The night chosen for the dance is always when the moon is well on the wane, so that it may be as dark as possible. About 7.30 p. m. the guests begin to arrive, and seat themselves in a semi-circle facing the boys who have recently been circumcised, an open space being left for the dancers. The dancers, twenty to thirty in number, have meanwhile gone off into the bush to prepare for the ceremony. In olden days, when customs were more strictly observed, the identity of the dancers was carefully concealed from the boys and women. Having made all necessary preparations, the dancers, wearing masks and dressed up in fantastic fashion, *some mounted on stilts*, others on all-fours, or riding on the shoulders of companions, gradually approach the spot where the guests have assembled for the entertainment. The dancers come forward one by one, singing songs of praise or derision of someone in the assembly, and, having arrived at the open space left for the purpose, prance about much to the delight and feigned terror of the women and youngsters. If the dancer satisfies the somewhat critical audience, he is given a chicken or "*thumini*" (50 cents), or some other small reward. He then makes way for the next one, and so on until the small hours of the morning, when the dance is brought to an end."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a root, well known to any one who has given any study at all to Bantu languages, which occurs in a great many East African languages and signifies "ancestral spirits."

<sup>2</sup> E. C. Chubb, *East African Masks* etc. Man, p. 145, 1924.

From the Wanyamwezi, Steere quite briefly mentions "how the boys amuse themselves with swings and walking on stilts."<sup>1</sup> Masked dances, it would seem, do not occur among the Wanyamwezi. They are, however, a people of wandering habits, of whom there are colonies in many scattered parts of East Africa as well as, and perhaps not least, in the area between Lakes Tanganyika and Bangweolo, whence I have collected at least one instance of the use of stilts (vide previous paper). By this I only mean to suggest that the stilts of the Wanyamwezi boys may constitute an imported element.

Lastly there may be mentioned a quite interesting African "discovery site" for which, both as regards verbal description and illustrations, I am indebted to B. Struck. For it will be seen that stilt-walking is practised on festive occasions among the diamond-mine labourers at Lüderitzbucht, as evidenced by figs. 10 and 11, taken by Dr. H. Fleischer on New-Year's Day 1928. The stilt-walkers are also wearing masks. As Struck points out in a letter to me, this occurrence of stilts is very remarkable, because among these labourers none of those tribes are represented that use stilts, the workers in question consisting partly of "Cape-boys" (a mixed breed, natives of the Cape Colony, of Hottentot, Negro, Malay, and European blood), partly of Ovambo, and latterly many Bechuana. The stilts appear to be very high, and not reaching as far as the hips, in view of which it does not appear very probable that they constitute an imitation of such stilts as may happen to occur among German children within the area in question.

To this information contributed by Struck I have hardly anything to add. It should however be remembered that stilts occur (as I have shown in my first paper) among the Kafirs, Zulus, and others, although most likely only as a pastime for boys. There may perhaps be more probability in a supposition that during the time of German occupation stilts were introduced into Lüderitzbucht by natives from Cameroon or the southern portion of the late German East Africa. For in both those areas they occur, as we have seen, in a more or less ritual use.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Steere, *East African Tribes and Languages*. Journ. Anthr. Inst., p. cli. London 1872.

The material given above constitutes a supplementation of my first paper, on the use of stilts, which is valuable in several respects. Among other things, there have been established additional instances of their practical use in Europe as also of their occurrence in connection with ritual observances and festivities (in China and Africa). It is, however, difficult to conceive of any additional points of view from which this supplementary material may be considered, and therefore I confine myself to referring to the reflections with which I concluded my first paper.

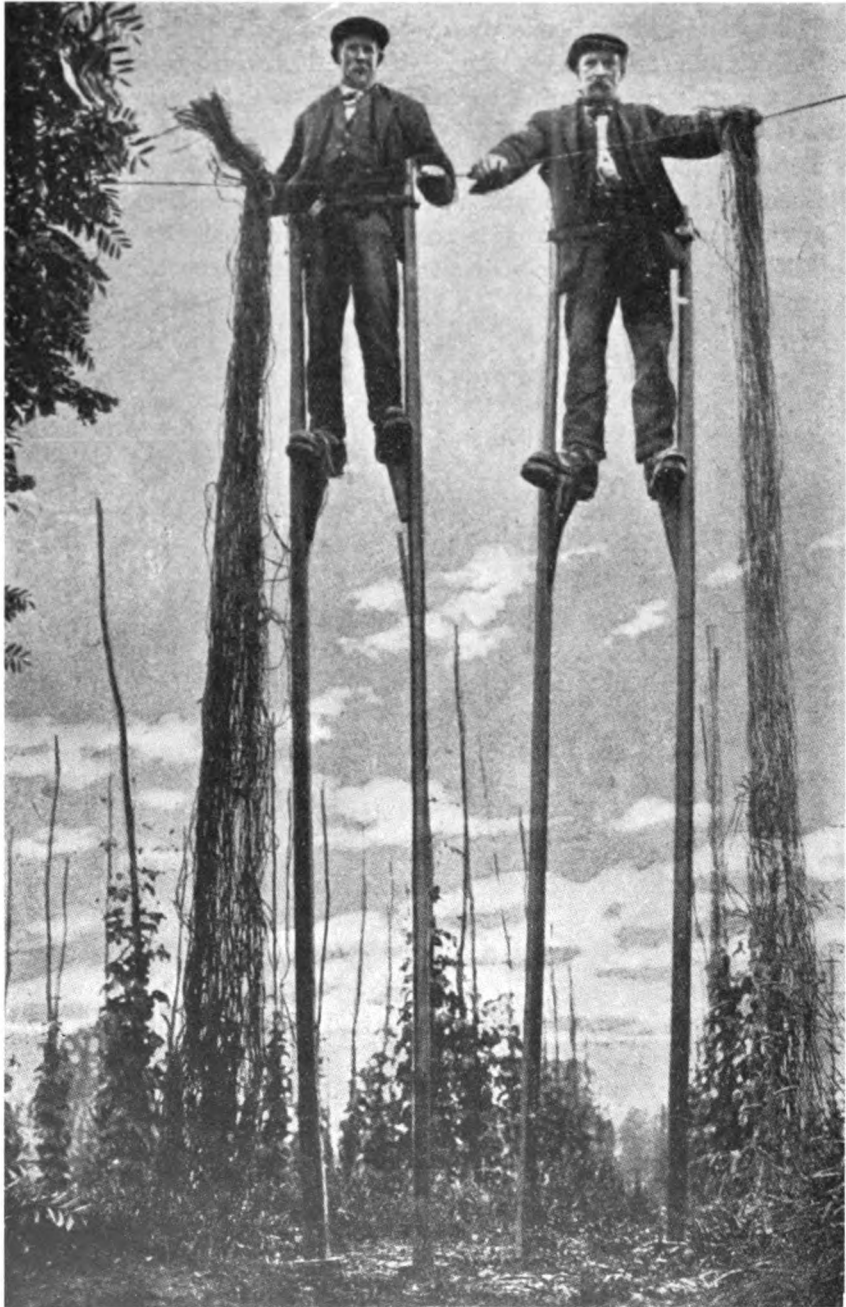


Fig. 1. Two Kentish hop-pickers repairing broken strings before the hops reach the top of the poles. The upper ends of the stilts are joined together with a leathern strap which evidently goes round the man's waist. (*The Sphere*, 1927).



Fig. 2. A Kentish hop-picker. Vide fig. 1. (The Sphere, 1927.)

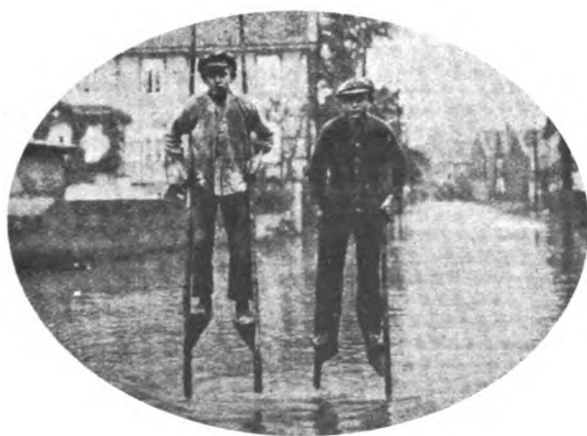


Fig. 3. From flooded Brunswick, Germany, autumn of 1926.  
(Ill. Köln. Zeitung, 13. 11. 1926.)



Fig. 4. Chinese stilt-walkers on a New Year's Day at Niuchwang.  
(Globus 75, 1899.)



Fig. 5. Stilt-walkers at a New Year's festival at Kienli, Hu-peh  
Province, China. (A. E. Wandel. phot.)





Fig. 6. Japanese young people walking on stilts in snow.  
(Struck's collection, from *Deutsche Illustrierte*, 1926.)



Fig. 7. From «Dia de Reyes» (Epiphany) in Havana, Cuba; middle of the 19th century. The stilt-walker seen in the picture is wearing a mask, and the stilts are evidently tied on to his legs. (From F. Ortiz.)



Fig. 8. Lower portion of one of the stilts appearing in  
Dr. Gebbing's motion picture compiled in Liberia.  
Painted in black and white.  
(Sketch by B. Struck.)



Fig. 9. Habe stilt-walkers.  
(Pathé Frères. Film No. 384.)



Fig. 11. On New Year's Day at Lüderitzbucht.  
Vide fig. 10.



Fig. 10. Native mine labourers at Lüderitzbucht celebrating New Year's  
Day, 1928. In the centre a masked stilt-walker.  
(Struck's collection. H. Fleischer, phot.)





## RIKSMUSEETS ETNOGRAFISKA AVDELNING

### SMÄRRE MEDDELANDEN

- N:r 1. *K. G. Lindblom.* Einige Details in der Ornamentik der  
Buschneger Surinams. Stockholm 1926 Price Kr. 1: —
- N:r 2. *K. G. Lindblom.* Die Schleuder in Afrika und anderwärts.  
Stockholm 1927 ..... » » 2: —
- N:r 3. *K. G. Lindblom.* The Use of Stilts, especially in Africa  
and America. Stockholm 1927 ..... » » 2: 25
- N:r 4. *K. G. Lindblom.* Fighting-Bracelets and kindred Weapons  
in Africa. Stockholm 1927..... » » 2: 25
- N:r 5. *K. G. Lindblom.* The spiked Wheel-trap and its Distribution.  
Stockholm 1928..... » » 2: 25